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DEVELOPING CRIMINAL PERSONAS FOR DESIGNERS

A Panel Paper from the British Society of Criminology Conference 2008

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This paper describes a research method used to develop criminal personas for use by designers in a process called Cyclic Countering of Competitive Creativity (C4). Personas rather than profiles are developed to encourage designer ownership, to improve the level of engagement with countering the criminal mind, and encourage the responsibility to keep the personas live and developing, rather than be adopted as simple checklists built from available criminal profile data.

In this case study indirect access to offender details was used to develop the personas. The aim was to give particular focus to the criminal's 'creative prompts', which enable designers to more effectively counter their own design solutions, by a role-play approach to critical review and counter design. The C4 process enables learning through failure, and strengthens the development and selection that takes place within the design process, but C4 does rely upon the development of relevant and engaging personas to be effective.

Keywords: Personas, Design Against Crime, C4, Creativity, Critical Review

Hilton is Head of Research at the Centre for Design Research, at Northumbria University. He has been developing the Cyclic Countering of Competitive Creativity (C4) critical design process, for crime prevention purposes, working in conjunction with Northumbria University's Computer Forensics and Salford University's Design Against Crime Solution Centre.

Background

Criminology, as a study of why and how people behave anti-socially, has great opportunity to develop and disseminate its knowledge and research methods across disciplines. Further to this, not only might criminology teach others, but in such a beneficial process others might in turn teach criminology something new. Presently, as commented by members of the British Society of Criminology, at their 2008 conference in Huddersfield, there is a growing need to bring new perspectives into the profession. This paper describes how criminology has aided designers in their engagement with crime prevention projects, by developing criminal personas for use with the C4 design process.

The beginnings of the Cyclic Countering of Competitive Creativity (C4) process originated in 1989 with Hilton taking a novel approach to crime prevention in response to a Royal Society of Arts tamper evident baby food packaging project, which resulted in a major award. The approach followed the observation that designers, at times fall into the trap of being protective of their ideas, seeking to prove a proposed function rather than investigating disproof. The scientific method of looking to disprove, was arguably more logical. If no disproof was found for the success of a function or aesthetic, then it would be reasonable to conclude that the proposal would be effective.

In the early stage of developing the C4 process it was acknowledged that a more demanding or negative process would quickly be dropped in favour of easier approaches, unless the rewards were clearly desirable and engaging. The approach proposed was to use, and enjoy using, a role-play process. The personas of *Malicious* and *Calculating* packaging tamperers were developed and applied on the first occasion. Those personas were however, what are now referred to as ‘assumption’ personas (Pruitt and Adlin, 2006), developed from preconceptions and some readily available information through the media. In brief: the Malicious persona tampered opportunistically for kicks, they would ‘have a go’ at almost any package but give up if it required determination; while the Calculating persona was a planner with the goal of extortion from retailers, they would target packaging of those products and brands which carried the greatest commercial impact, and these individuals would be very determined.

At this point the differentiation between profiles and personas should be made clear. Profiles, were first developed by Brussel (1968), and are defined here as ‘working constructions’ of *yet to be identified individuals*. Crime scene data is gathered to develop these profiles, which are applied as investigative tools, to narrow down suspect pools, and catch suspects. Ainsworth, (2000), reported that it has been difficult to evaluate the success of profiling, as profiles are not evidence or proof themselves, and inaccurate profiles may lead some investigators off track. An accurate profile may equally fit a number of other people, and so care must be taken not to treat the ‘suspect’ as guilty until proven so.

Personas, as defined here, are ‘working constructions’ of *identified types*. The persona development uses criminal records and direct accounts from the criminals; otherwise it uses secondary accounts through their associates, or crime-prevention agencies. These accounts develop the criminal’s perspectives, reflecting their opportunity and risk imagination, which could then be used in team situations, as a countering tool to improve the critical thinking and analysing processes in Design Against Crime. The success of this approach is that it immerses and engages the team members in the development and application of the counter perspectives, and more effectively informs the process than the use of assumptions developed from personal experience of users alone. This process is not without its own ethical concerns though. The users must guard against developing and applying the personas in an unethical manner. The intention is to determine solutions which challenge and positively change the criminal’s behaviour. The process must not physically or mentally harm the criminals, their associates, or bystanders, by either the process of investigation or role-play. Ideally, the acceptable outcomes are responsibly improved win-win responses, where the criminal intent or anti-social behaviour is used against itself to devalue such actions. This first-option

approach seeks to avoid immediate involvement in what might become counter-counter escalation.

In the case of C4, the personas are used in cycles to assault concept solution proposals, following each concept generation period. The 'criminal' aim is to see if the crime prevention proposals can be obstructed, resolved, or even misused for further criminal intent. The designer aim is then to address, negate or counter the 'criminal' criticisms and propositions. The C4 process cycles the phases of creative and critical thinking from designer to criminal to designer to criminal, until a point is reached where strong propositions have been selected and developed.

It was identified during the tamper evident packaging project that though the profile background of a persona was useful in establishing a context and motivation, the most important element of the personas were their creative prompts. These prompts, as with some other details, were developed in parallel with the packaging project, whereas the approach for this and future projects would be to develop more defined personas prior to project start. The prompts specifically relate to opportunity identification and considerations of criminal access, or countering of crime prevention products and services. As prompts rather than instructions, they are not intended to describe exactly how to commit a specific crime, but suggested how a particular persona would more generically consider and develop criminal opportunity. It was logical to conclude that though criminals might differ in motivation and perspective from designers, there was still evidence of creative and critical thinking processes being employed, as noted by Brower (1999).

An additional point of concern has since been that if the prompts are addressed as part of the project brief, as a set of considerations or a checklist, there is a danger that to some degree it becomes a tick-in-the-box exercise. The beauty of persona development and application is that things like creative prompt lists can be kept alive, being added to, in response to the new experience and observations of the users. It would be inappropriate to develop a persona like a snapshot, unresponsive to change. Engaging with change, looking for new opportunities enables further development of competitive edge, in this case possibly forecasting the next form of crime before it becomes a reality. For instance, as new technologies are reviewed in the press, there is opportunity to use C4 to think ahead of the 'competition'.

Ex-criminals' experience might be used for product/service development, as is the case in some security related firms to test systems and services. However, it is an effective alternative or addition if designers can be enabled to switch between defensive and offensive perspectives at will, especially at the concept development phase of a project.

This process was more recently applied by Hilton and Irons (2006), across the professions of Product Design and Computer Forensics, when the potential of C4 for improvement in quantity and quality of ideas generated with criminal persona brainstorming was investigated. A significant amount of secondary research was carried out in preparation, with reference to texts including: Katz (1988), Ekblom (1997) and Gudjonsson and Sigurdsson (2004). This informed the creation of more developed personas than had been used for the tamper evident packaging project. However, these more effectively researched personas were edited to provide only concise prompting to those individuals engaged in the brainstorm sessions. In review of that project, the evidence suggested that there was justification for further research, with a view to enabling primary research to inform more effectively 'developed' personas.

The following section describes the development process for C4 criminal personas.

Persona Development Process

The research assistant, Katherine Henderson, working in the Centre for Design Research, was initially given a selection of the prior research texts to review, including: Mawby (2001), Bartol and Barton (2005), Hilton and Irons (2006), Pruitt and Adlin (2006). Then she was introduced to members of Newcastle's Community Safety Unit (CSU) in the Civic Centre.

First priority for the project was to build a sense of reality by discussing what themes would be the most appropriate to investigate and present. It was proposed by the CSU that burglary

from student accommodation and graffiti in Newcastle would be two major and contrasting themes. With the directional themes agreed, the second priority was to create a network of informed contacts, who could describe and discuss the real issues and criminal considerations, without direct association with the criminals. The choice not to base the primary research on direct interviewing of criminals and ex-criminals in this instance was because of the short timescale of the project and the anticipated time frame for the University ethical procedure. However, a future, longer-term project would aim to take this direct route to persona development if possible, following ethical approval.

The network of contacts included representatives from: Community Safety, Crime Prevention, Prolific Priority Offenders Team, Probation, Mental Health, and Education. Through these points of access the researcher was able to carry out a series of in-depth interviews, gaining 'real life', rich and detailed information, not considered accessible through secondary research.

It was noted that some of the sources interviewed carried conflicting perspectives. This important observation has also been made in 2007 by members of the ThinkCrime Expert Panel, a separate project running in parallel to this one. The ThinkCrime project is a Social Development Fund supported collaboration between the universities of Salford, Manchester Metropolitan, Central Lancashire, Huddersfield and Northumbria, involving crime prevention practitioners from those regions in discussion and development of opportunities for more effective management of crime prevention. The reason the issue of conflicting perspectives is important, is that it supports the case for primary research to be conducted with the criminals and ex-criminals, as a future research opportunity. However, even then it is anticipated that the sample would be skewed, in that it would be made up of criminals who had been caught, or who were open about their activities. It might be argued that the most useful personas would be of those creative enough not to be caught.

The interviewing of crime prevention practitioners in the North East enabled an analysis of interactions to also inform how the crime prevention system functioned, breaking down generalisations and misconceptions.

The researcher carried out primary and secondary research in parallel, referring not just to the previous project reference list but carried out a new search using keywords from the two crime brief areas. Among others, these texts included: Budd (1999) for Burglary; and Macdonald (2001) for Graffiti.

An additional ethnographic approach was taken, where scenes of crime and potential sites for crime were visited and photographed, including vandalised alleyways and graffiti sites. The researcher also entered an Internet forum on graffiti under a pseudonym, and gathered information from a range of sources.

A number of websites also provided useful information to support the interviews, including the sites of: Northumbria Police, Home Office, Crime Stoppers, Crime Reduction, and Vandal Squad.

In the final stage of the development, the researcher returned to her designer role, sorting and formatting the most salient information into criminal persona cards. With peer review from the project network she was able to select the four most valuable personas from the ranges she had developed for both burglary and graffiti. Each of these 8 card pairs then followed the same format of presentation. See figures 1 and 2.

To support these cards guidance was also provided for applying the personas and carrying out the C4 process. The guidance included some simple drama exercises to help team members get into their characters, and this was aided by a suggestion of props and sources of further contextual information.


The amateurs' of the burglary world...

Age band 18+
Sex Male
History

- * Has been implicated in over 25 walk-in burglaries.

Character

- * He's a bit of a chancer!
- * He thinks that 'if people are stupid enough to leave doors open then they deserve to be burgled'.
- * He's easily led and influenced by peers.
- * Sees stealing as a quick and easy way of getting cash.
- * Gets a rush from doing it.
- * Doesn't think twice about taking your stuff ...he'll only get a police caution.
- * Little structure in his life...lives a day-to-day existence.
- * Takes recreational drugs.



Tools of the trade





- * Alert to an opportunity.

How he operates

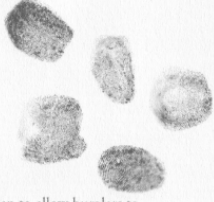
- * Takes anything that will sell.
- * Looks for open doors or windows or poorly maintained properties.
- * He surveys properties looking for things left on display...computer on desk facing onto the street, etc.
- * Acts spontaneously...May burgle a property on his way home if an opportunity presents itself.
- * Is versatile in his approach to an opportunity.
- * Sells on goods to friends in the pub or keeps them for himself.
- * Will carry what he can but will also stash goods to collect later from a wheelie bin etc.
- * If he discovered a property that is favourable to a brake in he'll come back that night and burgle.
- * He may wait until students are away on summer semester and try and get into a house.
- * Operates fairly close to home.

Opportunist



The oppotunist burglar was delivering leaflets, and found the door was left on a chain...all it took for him to gain entry to the house was to reach his arm around the door and unfasen the chain.

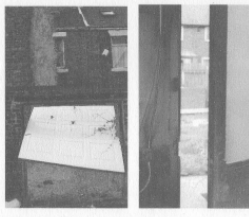
Open ground floor window...



A poorly maintained gardens can act as a screen to allow burglars to access property without detection

Ladders left out..



Open or damaged doors

Figure 1. Opportunist Burglar Persona Cards.

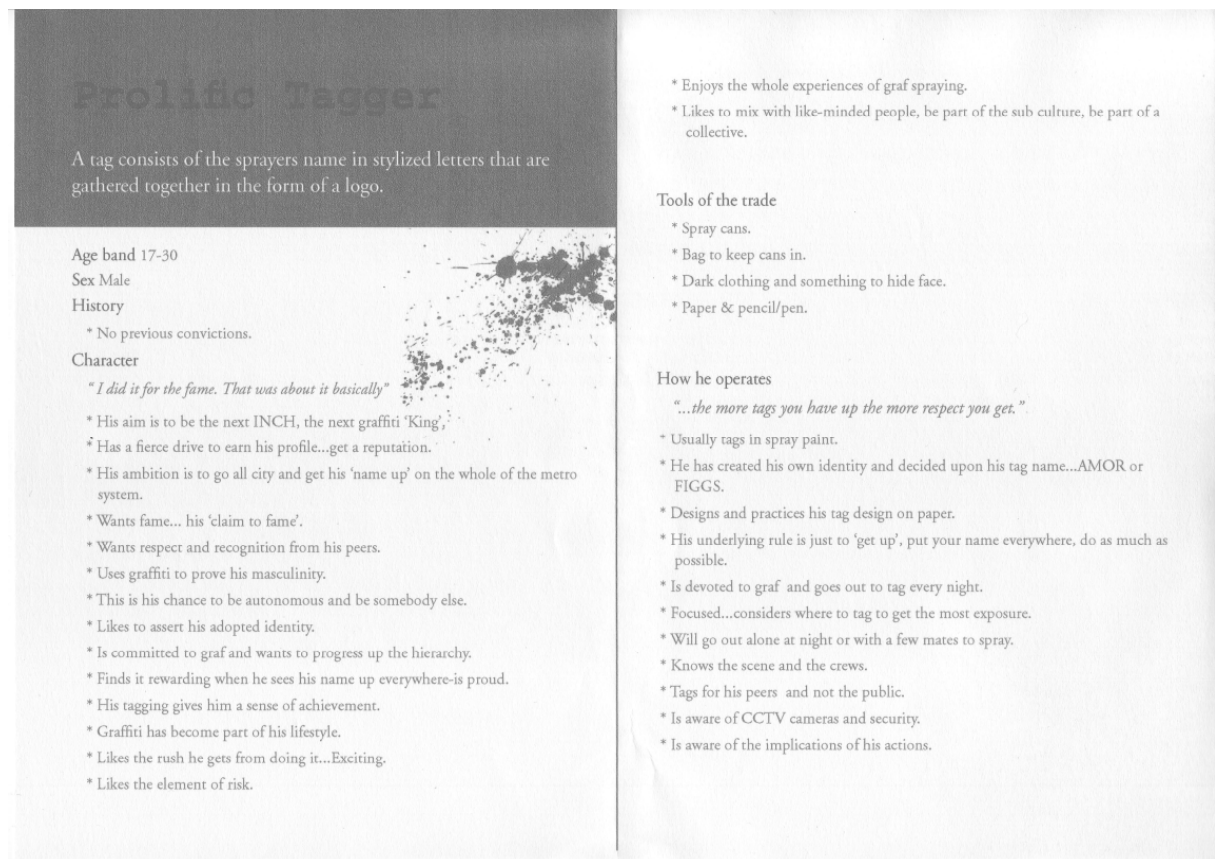


Figure 2. Prolific Tagger Graffiti Persona Cards.

Discussion

The objective of this project was to support practice of the C4 process. Persona cards were developed to represent different types of criminals and establish given scenarios. This approach enabled designers to take on their given persona and apply that certain type of criminal thinking to each stage of the design process. The designer, having taken on the criminal persona would be more aware and able to ensure that their design proposal anticipated the potential for crime, maintaining user friendliness but simultaneously making designs 'abuser unfriendly'. This design strategy has sought to introduce design changes, making criminal actions less attractive to the offender.

To deliver this it was necessary to ascertain how criminals think, their approaches, their character, and their motives. This began with a breakdown of each of the two chosen criminal groups to form titled categories. These were then reduced to a total of 8, selected on the basis of maintaining an effective range of 'types', which could be readily engaged with and contribute to creative and critical thinking. For example for the burglary subdivision, 4 'types' were selected; the *professional* burglar who does it as a full time 'job', the *calculating*, the *prolific* and the *opportunistic* who sees it as a quick and easy way to make a little cash. It was found to be essential to the success of this project that adequate research time was dedicated at this stage to ensure that the information gained was accurate to avoid inappropriate typecasting.

Time planning was essential for the investigation, having to consider: the question phrasing for effective elicitation of knowledge and later analysis; identifying the right practitioners to interview; interview timing and travel; support photography; and some margin for new interview and development opportunities which could arise as the project progressed.

The process of creating the persona cards started with analysis of secondary data and then advanced to the acquisition of indirect primary data through the crime prevention practitioners. Varying research techniques were used to compile the intrinsic data required. The information gained from in-depth interviewing, following the ongoing establishment of a project network, was invaluable in obtaining 'real life', rich detailed information. Face-to-face interviews offered the possibility of modifying ones' line of inquiry, following up interesting and unanticipated responses and investigating motives, providing a level of insight not found in public reports or books referred to. The anthropological data obtained when interviewing and when photographing environments helped to bring a sense of reality and substance to the development of the persona cards. Preconceptions and generalisations were replaced by actualisation. Beliefs, attitudes, experiences and motives were used to define persona 'types'. It is important to invest time in setting up face-to-face interviews as opposed to telephone interviews. There is a greater sense of trust between interviewer and interviewee when eye-to-eye contact is possible. The issue of 'trust' has also been highlighted by ThinkCrime as a communications problem between practitioners that may influence effective crime prevention management. So, developing a rapport with key research respondents was vital to informing and developing criminal persona content. It was necessary to draw information from a number of parties linked to the criminal fraternity to enable varying viewpoints and alternative perspectives to be considered and analysed collectively to try and maintain a degree of objectivity.

On reflection the interviews proved to be an effective and powerful tool, the only drawback being the duration of time it then took to process the qualitative data, clarifying and illustrating the implication of the findings.

Ethnographic research was another crucial information source used in the creation of the persona cards. The researcher carried out site visits to create a sense of immersion in 'their' culture, considering their lifestyles and codes of practice to go some way towards better understanding the criminal world as criminals do. This experience allowed the deconstruction of generalised views of a subculture, and enabled an identification of individual types and the consideration of their specific motives, establishing how they accomplish what they do. This degree of participation and observation helped to redefine the way the researcher saw things, and it is proposed as an immersion experience for designers involved in crime prevention.

In terms of both commercial and academic practice it is important that the designer or lecturer intending to use this criminal persona development methodology to inform the C4 process, approach it with an open mind. They must jettison personal perceptions and values associated with the criminal fraternity, as this may lead to response biases of various kinds, which may counter the effectiveness of the creative and critical thinking. It is difficult to engage prejudice-free, which re-enforces the need to amass a wide range of information from different 'sides' of the debate.

Conclusion

The intent and approach to describe by example the development of criminal personas, their cards and other support material for designers, has on review by crime prevention practitioners been seen as having great potential for success. The research informed the development of clearly presented personas and user guidance enabling the design practitioner or academic to avoid applying stereotypical and standardized data within the design process, which would potentially result in ill-informed design outcomes.

Where some professions have already employed persona development to engage their creative processes more effectively with their market types and needs, C4 seeks to engage creatives' with their market's competition. The nature of critical attack carries motivational issues, yet the role-play approach to persona ownership with C4 is argued to overcome much of the reluctance to engage with such a proposition.

It is anticipated that users of the C4 process, especially those who engage with the active development and maintenance of the personas, will experience a change in mind-set, enabling

more effective development of 'competitive' crime prevention product/process/service solutions.

In conclusion of this stage of the project it was proposed that there should be benefit in direct primary research. Such an approach would avoid conflicts which may be noted through indirect primary research, because of different perspectives held by some crime prevention agencies. While it would seem preferable to conduct primary research with 'practising criminals', to build up an even greater understanding of the criminal fraternity, further investigation is needed to compare effectiveness of directly and indirectly researched personas to qualify this point.

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